

Adapting the Advance Translation Method for use at Large U.S. Survey Organizations

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Disclaimer: This presentation is intended to inform people about research and to encourage discussion. The views expressed are those of the authors and not those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

Introduction

- Critical need for complete and accurate survey translations to have valid and parallel data collected across languages
- 3MC Survey translation recommendations (Cross cultural Survey Guidelines, 2015; European Social Survey translation Guidelines (2018), U.S. Census Bureau guidelines, 2005)
- Recent book on Sociolinguistics of Survey translation discusses importance of design, translation review and pretesting (Pan, Sha and Park 2020)
- Team members from different backgrounds: Survey sponsors, translators, survey methodologists, subject matter experts and linguists
- Question: How to best accomplish this: Need for practical guidelines

Survey Translation Methods

- Decentering (Werner and Campbell 1970; Potaka & Cochrane, 2004)
- Back translation (Harkness, 2003; Behr and Braun, 2022)
- Modified committee approach to translation (Harkness & Schoua Glusberg, 1998)
- Close translation v. adaptation (Repke and Dorer, 2021)
- Advance translation (Dorer 2022; Fitzgerald 2015; Dorer 2020).

Advance Translation

- A method first implemented by the European Social Survey (ESS) to make source questionnaire more understandable when translated, improve ease and quality of translation (Dorer 2011; Fitzgerald 2015; Dorer 2020).
- Translation teams conduct an initial translation to identify problems before the source text is finalized. These problems are sent back to the survey methodologists so the original text can be revised to improve translatability

Survey Translation at the U.S. Census Bureau

- Specialized translation office for Decennial Census, American Community Survey and related materials
- Other surveys administered by the agency: use of translation contract
- Typical process: translation followed by review and ideally pretesting via cognitive interviews when resources allow
- Why advance translation? Improving the source wording as part of the translation process can increase comparability of data

Modified Advance Translation: A Case Study

- Translation of an interviewer administered survey:
 - New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey (NYCHVS)
- Languages: Spanish, Russian, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Bengali, and Haitian-Creole
 - English source wording and Spanish translation being updated at the same time that the survey was being translated into four new languages
 - Great opportunity to try the advance translation method

Advance Translation Steps

1. Initial translation (ideally done by team/committee approach)
2. Identification of issues (coding of translation/source wording difficulties)
3. Consensus (translators creating 1 version of feedback)
4. Review (Source language (English) survey designer team reviews recommendations)
5. Final translation done
6. Respondent pretesting

Training the Translators

- Hour long training administered by phone to all translators including:
 - Background information about the survey
 - Goals of the project:
 - providing a linguistically and culturally appropriate translation
 - Evaluating the English source text to determine and improve translatability
 - Definition of advance translation
 - Procedure to be followed
 - Schedule
 - Team member roles and responsibilities
 - Codes to be used with examples

Advance Translation Sample Codes

Code	Type comments requested
Intercultural Problem / Cultural difference	“Native American”: This concept meaning indigenous peoples of the U.S. does not exist in Spanish speaking countries. A literal translation won't work
Institutional / factual difference	“Foster care”: This is a U.S. program that does not exist elsewhere. Difficult to translate literally
Wording / formulation / phraseology	“Parent”: There is no gender-neutral term for parent in Spanish. You can say "padre" [father] or "padre o madre" [mother or father], but there is no one-word equivalent for the gender neutral concept of parent.

Translation Contract Considerations

Started with pre-existing translation contract:

1. Translators had varying experience with survey translation
2. Payment structure: translators paid by the word and not the hour
3. Some translators located outside of the U.S. were unfamiliar with terminology relating to U.S.-specific programs
4. Translation quality: Evidence of un-reviewed machine translations
5. On our end: lack of survey methodologists who could speak all languages in question in order to be able to review translators' work

Introduction of Language Reviewers (LRs)

- Background: professional or educational experience in New York City where survey to be administered
 - Translators in the court system, higher education, working with population in question
- 2 LR's hired per language: Spanish, Russian, Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese), Bengali, Haitian Creole
 - Difficult to find language experts in local area for Haitian Creole
- Role: Reviewing translations, attending multiple iterations of in-language and cross-language consensus meetings, revising translations

Cross Language Consensus Meetings: Solutions to translation difficulties

- Discussion of issues that crossed languages
 - Difficulty translating intensity modifiers (e.g. “strongly” agree) in answer scales.
 - Changed scales to be unlabeled numbers with labeled end-points
 - Elimination of problematic terms across languages. Example: “unit”
- Adapting questions when an equivalent concept does not exist
 - “Household” (Spanish, Bengali)

Cross Language Solutions (continued)

- Using English words to convey US-specific concepts
 - Down payment (Bengali)
- Identifying constructions that sounded unnatural in other languages
 - Sexual orientation: “Do you think of yourself as...” (several languages)
- Some questions were structurally impossible to translate
 - What pronoun would the respondent like interviewer to use to refer to different household members? (Chinese)

Pilot Study Challenges/Issues

- Complexity in ordering the steps
- Large number of languages included
- Time consuming nature of work
- Sometimes a word or phrase would work in 5 out of 6 languages
- Cohort or generational issues among respondents or LRs
- Finding qualified researchers not easy in every language

Considerations for other agencies

- Thinking about “plain language” survey design in English (source language)
- How to develop and maintain translator/LR teams
- When updates are made to the English, do you reconvene all teams?
- What about when new languages are added to the survey?
- Pretesting: when and how to conduct: How many languages?
- Language access / Language justice

Adapting the Advance Translation Method for use at Large U.S. Survey Organizations

Thank you!

For more information:

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